
Restorative Practices in the Classroom

A few years ago we met a high school English teacher who was really struggling with one of her ninth-grade classes. Every day the students were disrespectful and disruptive. They criticized and made fun of all her assignments and activities. She tried to be more creative and tailor the class to be more fun and interesting for them, but no matter what she did, nothing seemed to work. She felt like there was nothing she could do to change things.

After she talked to an IIRP consultant, she formulated a new plan of action. She pulled two ringleaders aside after class, told them that she was frustrated with their behavior and said the following: “While you guys might not like English class, I work very hard to make this class interesting. I don’t think it is fair for you to say that assignments are ‘stupid’ without even giving them a chance, and it hurts my feelings. I’d like you to make a commitment to not do that anymore.” They seemed surprised at her directness but agreed to her request.

Several weeks later she reported that the class had gotten better, but that she wasn’t absolutely sure that her discussion with the two

students had anything to do with it. Perhaps it was a coincidence.

Then, a month later, the teacher found herself with a new student in her class who transferred from another school district. While she was handing out a worksheet, the new student muttered loud enough for her to hear, “Man, this is so stupid!” Both of the students she had previously talked with came to her defense. They immediately spoke up and told him: “Don’t say that. She really works hard on this stuff!”



Figure 1. Restorative Practices Continuum.

Affective Statements

The way the classroom teacher talked to her students is similar to the way the principal talked to the students in the story in the Introduction. In this instance you have a teacher, rather than an administrator, confronting the students. Teachers sometimes think they don’t have a lot of power to influence their students, but here we see in a very informal exchange that the teacher’s feelings alone counted for a lot. All that the teacher really did, without embarrassing the students, was to give the students a little information about herself. She told them she works hard to make the class interesting, and she asked them to promise to give her assignments a chance.

The teacher used what we call “affective statements” (see page 67 for more on the psychology of affect). That is, she told the students how they affected her. Affective statements are the most informal type of response on the “Restorative Practices Continuum” (see Figure 1). This chapter will discuss the whole range of restorative responses, from informal to formal. Along with affective questions, affective statements are some of the easiest and most useful tools for building a restorative classroom. When a teacher sets a more positive

tone on a day-to-day basis, more serious problems that require more serious responses tend to diminish in both intensity and frequency.

The term “affective statements” is another way of saying “expressing your feelings” or “sharing impact.” Day-to-day experiences impact us and evoke feelings. When the sun is shining and the sky is blue, we tend to experience positive affect. We smile, take in a deep breath, have a feeling of warmth and perhaps increased energy. When a passerby shares an energetic “good morning,” the positive impact can be contagious. Conversely, unfavorable interactions can elicit adverse feelings and impact. Unexpected traffic delays or car problems can shape our attitude by churning up negative emotions. When we enter our workplace unnerved by the morning’s events and colleagues are themselves hurried and stressed, the gloomy affect may continue. Expressing your feelings, positive or negative, is a crucial first step toward fostering healthy group dynamics.

We should strive to express both pleasant and unpleasant feelings. We have repeatedly found that many students are completely unaware of the impact — positive and negative — that their behavior has on others. Students will learn that you genuinely care about them and are truly excited when they do well. They will also learn that when they fail to meet expectations, it was more than just a norm or rule that was violated. Their relationship with you and others was also violated.

Affective statements can be used to acknowledge success, hard work, collaboration or any other desirable behavior. The more specific you are about what the student did and how you feel, the better. “Good job today, Sam” is much less meaningful than “Sam, I was really happy that you worked for the entire class period today.” When you take the time to verbally express your feelings by saying, for example, “It was a joy for me to see the way you developed that project,” you are going beyond the good grade written on the paper. You are giving the feedback a personal dimension. If you are out sick one day and the next day a student asks if you are feeling better, instead of just saying, “I feel better” or “Thanks for asking,” you can say, “It means a lot to me that you would ask how I’m feeling.” (See Figure 2 for more examples.)

Similarly, when a student's behavior causes concern, the more specific and emotive you can be, the better. "I'm upset" is better than "That is inappropriate." But a statement like "Lisa, I'm frustrated that you keep disrupting class today" is even more powerful. Similarly, "Don, I was shocked when I graded your paper. You are capable of doing much better" not only expresses your surprise at poor academic performance but also helps to separate the deed from the doer by sharing that you care about the student.

Frequently students will be more receptive to affective statements if they are delivered privately. Sometimes this is not practical and sometimes a public comment is more appropriate. Statements made publicly in an attempt to embarrass a student, however, almost always backfire. No teacher would enjoy being confronted publicly by the school principal for something the teacher was doing wrong. Young people are sensitive, too, and we have to show them respect, encourage them to express their feelings and try not to hurt them.

If you confront a child in front of the entire class when a private intervention is just as feasible, we might not define that as a restorative response, even if you are expressing your feelings. That goes for almost everything we talk about in this book. If you treat a student in a demeaning manner, it undermines the potential for improving your relationship with the student. "Restorative" means changing your own attitude, and it also means believing in students even when — and especially when — they seem to be behaving badly.

A student went into a rage one morning when she received a paper back from a teacher. There were corrections marked all over it and the grade was very low. The student stood up and started cursing at the teacher and couldn't be mollified. She left the class and stomped through the halls of the school shouting about how angry she was and how terrible the teacher was. The principal heard her and by this time had gotten the story from the teacher. The girl had been to the principal's office before and they had a relationship. The principal approached the angry student and calmly said, "I'm so proud of you. I never knew you cared this much about your schoolwork and what your teacher thought of you."

This literally stopped the student in her tracks and she began to cry. In this moment, by reframing the student's anger, a positive resolution to the problem came to light. The student was ashamed to receive a bad mark and she was lashing out. The affective statement — "I am so proud of you" — sincerely given, surprised the student. It was the last thing she expected to hear. The next statement, which provided the reason the principal felt proud, affirmed the student's desire to do well in school. In the same instance it gave the student a chance to see how her own behavior was out of line. Eventually, the student could discuss different and more appropriate responses to getting a bad grade. She went back and apologized to the teacher and found out what she could do to improve her grade.

TYPICAL RESPONSE	AFFECTIVE STATEMENT
» Nice job on your project.	» I am so impressed with the results of your final project.
» It doesn't always rain in Seattle.	» I am so excited you can sightsee in Seattle when the sun is shining.
» Thank you for getting straight to work.	» I am thrilled that we are all ready for class.
» Stop teasing Sandy.	» I'm uncomfortable when I hear you tease Sandy.
» You shouldn't do that.	» When I saw you shove past people in the hall, I was worried that someone was going to get hurt.

Figure 2. Other examples of affective statements.

Informal affective statements can be offered when you see a child doing something that makes you uncomfortable as a teacher. They offer an alternative when you are tired of saying, “Don’t do that,” “Stop that” or, “Don’t you think you’re being inappropriate?”

A principal walked into the faculty lounge before school and heard three third-grade teachers discussing ways to increase cooperation among their students at recess time. Instead of saying, “Thanks for attending to this issue, folks,” he used an affective statement: “I feel so lucky to have teachers that care so much about our students. Thanks for taking the time to work together on this.”

Highlighting the positive feelings and affects that arise as a result of witnessing favorable behavior is critical for building a positive community climate. It’s great when everyone arrives on time for a staff meeting, for example, but instead of simply acknowledging that, try being more explicit. You might say, “I was delighted that everyone was on time today. It allowed us to address all the issues on the agenda in a timely way.” When you utilize affective statements to affirm positive behavior and attitudes, it helps strengthen everyone’s commitment to being proactive about building a connected community.

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

- » What happened?
- » What were you thinking of at the time?
- » What have you thought about since?
- » Who has been affected by what you have done? In what way have they been affected?
- » What do you think you need to do to make things right?

WHEN PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED

- » What did you think when you realized what had happened?
- » What impact has this incident had on you and others?
- » What has been the hardest thing for you?
- » What do you think needs to happen to make things right?

Figure 3. Restorative questions.

Affective Questions

Accepting that conflict is an integral part of life is crucial to adopting restorative practices. There will always be misunderstandings, competing needs and interests and differences of opinion. In a school the students will not always behave as you wish. Dealing with conflict is part of an educator's job, whether we like it or not. Restorative practices helps to revise our thinking so that we see conflict in a school setting as an opportunity to foster learning and build better relationships.

We make a distinction between punishment and natural or restorative kinds of consequences. In the case of the girl who exploded when she got a bad grade, punishment would have only reinforced her sense of outrage. She was upset. Her tears showed she was feeling remorse. Instead of punishment, the natural consequence of her actions was that she needed to do something to restore her place in the classroom. She cared about that class and that teacher, although at first glance we might not have suspected it. The natural consequence of her inappropriate behavior was to apologize to the teacher and ask what she could do to return to the class and earn a better grade.

She also had to ask the teacher how she felt about what had happened and what the teacher thought needed to happen in order to make things right. These are two of the affective questions, which, along with affective statements, are crucial tools. We also call these questions "restorative questions" (see Figure 3).

In 1995 Terry O'Connell, a former Australian police officer and restorative justice pioneer (past director of IIRP Australia, an IIRP affiliate), provided training in "restorative conferencing" for our CSF Buxmont staff. (Restorative conferencing is further explained later in this chapter.) He emphasized the power of the restorative questions and talked about how effective he had found them for working with offenders and victims of crime. We had been using similar questions for many years on a daily basis in our counseling programs, schools and group homes, but we had never formulated a list like in Figure 3.

Susan Wachtel, the co-founder of CSF Buxmont, was working in one of our schools the day after the training, and she decided to put these restorative questions to the test.

Susan observed a student behaving inappropriately toward a teacher in a class. She asked the teacher if she could talk to the student privately. When she and the student were seated in another room, she simply asked, “What happened?” and got quiet. The boy, who initially was angry about being removed from the class, surprised Susan with his willingness to respond to the question. He candidly told Susan what he had been doing to bother the teacher.

Since the first question worked, she continued, working her way through the list of questions. “I sat there amazed at what the kid was saying,” Susan reports in retelling the story of her experiment. “When I asked him how his behavior had affected the teacher, he said, ‘The teacher probably felt embarrassed. I think he was really mad. I know I got him off track.’ The boy was so sincere, I was shocked.”

Susan went on to the next question: “Who else do you think was affected?” He said, “The kids in the class.”

Then she asked, “How do you think they were affected?” He said: “I know some kids were mad because they couldn’t concentrate. I know some kids were interested and they were distracted. My friend told me to be quiet, but I didn’t listen to him.”

Susan continued, “Well, how were you affected?” He said: “I’m disappointed in myself. I need to get a good grade, and I hurt my chances for that.”

By now the kid was clearly remorseful, no longer angry. Susan said, “How would you like to repair the harm that was done?” He answered: “Oh, I really want to apologize to my teacher. And then I think I want to apologize to my class.”

“When are you going to do that?” asked Susan. He responded, “When class is over I’ll talk to the teacher.”

And the boy did just what he said. The teacher was also surprised and couldn’t believe how sincere the student was. The exchange

took about ten minutes. And everyone — teacher, student and class — benefited.

This story illustrates how useful the entire list of questions can be, but you will more often use just one or two of these questions in an informal way for a quick exchange lasting a couple of minutes. Nonetheless, each intervention, no matter how brief, provides an important opportunity for young people to reflect on the impact of their behavior and to learn empathy for those whom they have affected.

For example, as an administrator, you may notice a quiet but heated discussion between two teachers in the foyer. You approach them to see if you can help, but they make light of the situation. You walk along with one of them and ask, “What happened?” You may then continue by asking, “How did you feel about that?” and “How do you think Jack felt about it?” Later in the day, you take the opportunity to ask Jack the same questions during his free period. If you find that they both have unresolved feelings but were willing to talk with you, you may then arrange to meet with them together at the end of the day. Use the same questions so they get to hear directly how each of them has been affected. Finally, you may ask, “How can this be repaired?” (This experience is actually a “small impromptu conversation,” which we will cover in the next section.)

Getting students to speak and find solutions is a significant shift for teachers and administrators. Usually we, as educators, find ourselves constantly correcting students’ behavior, which gets rather tiresome. We have come to believe that telling children what not to do is a necessary part of our job and we don’t see any options or alternatives. The affective questions can be helpful here because they let you turn the tables. You still address inappropriate behavior but in a way that asks students to think for themselves about their actions and to reflect on how they affect other people. That shifts responsibility away from you and places it on the students whose behavior is causing the problem.

In the previous section we discussed how affective statements

allow us to express our feelings to each other. Affective questions allow us to elicit from each other what we are thinking and feeling. When conflict occurs, the more we purposely engage in affective conversations with our students and colleagues, the more comfortable this will become. The affective questions in Figure 3 are a distillation of those we find to be effective to address conflict, but any questions that elicit feelings and address impact may be useful affective questions.

Notice that “Why did you do that?” is absent from the list. That question is really not helpful or relevant. Young people usually don’t know why they did something wrong. In all likelihood they were simply being thoughtless or impetuous, without any reason. And if they have to dig for a reason, it often ends up being a rationalization or justification. What is more effective is to foster a process of reflection by asking questions that will get the misbehaving young people to think about their behavior and how it impacted others.

The second column of questions in Figure 3 can be asked of those who have been affected by the inappropriate behavior. For example, if a student cheated by glancing at another student’s work, the second student could be asked “What did you think when you realized what had happened?” A lot of times the teacher simply punishes the offending student without directly tending to the needs of those who have been harmed by that student’s behavior. While the teacher may still have to decide on the consequence for cheating, merely punishing a student forgoes a critical learning opportunity. In fact, it’s not the teacher who has been harmed by the cheating as much as the other students in the class. They’re working hard and an individual is trying to take advantage of their efforts.

Of course, you have to use your own judgment to decide whether to deal with the problem privately or in front of other students. It may depend on the age and the personalities of the students themselves. We’ll deal with those considerations more in Chapter Two.

A helpful technique is to have the restorative questions listed on a piece of paper that can be handed to a student. Although it would

be great if we had enough time to sit down and talk things through with every student, that isn't always possible. Instead, asking a student to write down responses to the restorative questions on a sheet of paper may be more practical. Further, this can be a benefit because it promotes reflection and allows tempers to cool, including yours. It also allows you to give immediate attention to the problem without interrupting what you've been doing with the other students in the class. You might consider this time spent by the student on reflecting and writing as a way of providing a "time out" for older students.

Of course, asking restorative questions is only restorative if you use them properly. Bob, one of the authors of this book, remembers a time when he decided to use the questions with his 8-year-old daughter shortly after he learned about them. She misbehaved and Bob, at the top of his lungs, yelled, "What were you thinking?!" which did not promote the useful reflection associated with restorative practices. It is not that you must always be calm and never be angry. Showing emotions is natural, but restorative strategies don't work if your tone is purely punitive. When used appropriately, however, restorative practices can move the situation from anger to a more productive resolution.

A teacher at a suburban school just outside a major city says he uses a restorative approach in everyday interactions with students. "When I see a kid acting up in the hallway, instead of immediately dragging him into the discipline office, I'll pull him over, one-on-one, and try to find out exactly what's happening and understand where he's coming from," he explained. "A lot of times it's not the specific incident that's caused the conflict, but rather something that's happened earlier in the day or at home or in a previous class. Allowing that venting process tends to diffuse it, along with the feeling that an adult is listening and caring."

To conclude, conflict is most effectively addressed through direct conversations with the parties involved, with an effort to root people's responses in feelings – affect – and impact. It is also important to note that these conversations are not limited to students but

are also used for addressing issues among adults, including staff and parents.

Small Impromptu Conversations

Small impromptu conversations are a way to support positive behavior and to address concerning behavior. Using affective language, we can talk about the behaviors that we want to increase. For example, if you see a student stop and pick up an item that another student dropped, that may be a perfect opportunity to bring those students together and share the impact that action had. You could say, “I couldn’t help but smile when I saw you pick up Andre’s book. Thanks for making my morning!” The students may have never had anyone acknowledge such a small gesture. Other students around you may also see the positive impact and “pay it forward” later on.

As another example, a high school teacher saw a student push another student’s books out of his hands, and it looked like the two were about to start to fight. She pulled them aside in the hallway and said, “Hey, what happened here?” and she let each student talk. She said to the one who lost his books, “How were you affected by that?” The student replied that it made him really angry. The teacher expressed her feelings, too, by saying: “I don’t feel safe in the halls when students are fighting. I needed to get to another classroom, but I feel responsible when I see something like this.” Lastly, she asked the students to say what they wanted to see happen to resolve the issue. They promised not to fight and they both apologized to one another and to the teacher. No one was late for class.

The impact of small negative incidents can accumulate and adversely affect the class or school environment. The purpose of a small impromptu conversation is to address a problem to keep it from escalating and to resolve the problem quickly, but in a way that gets students actively engaged in expressing their feelings and in thinking about the impact of their behavior and about how to resolve conflicts.

For example, two girls on the playground are fighting to go down the slide first. A teacher might yell at them and say: “You’re going to hurt each

other. You need to stop arguing and cooperate. Why don't you take turns? Sally, you go first and then you, Andrea." That may stop the problem for the moment, but the kids may still be angry and feel unresolved.

Instead, an impromptu conversation might go like this: "Sally, Andrea, would you please come over here? I was really scared for you when I saw you fighting on the slide. What happened?" After each girl talks, say to each in turn, "What was your part in what happened?" One might try to blame the other, but you can say: "We're talking about just you right now. What was your part in this?" Finally, you can ask them, "Now what can you each do to make this better?"

People like to have their say. By asking the questions, you let each child reflect on how she added to the conflict, and then each can say how she wants the situation to be resolved. The teacher becomes a facilitator, rather than just a disciplinarian.

The last question about how to make things better is critical because it is reintegrative in nature. Punishments can leave kids feeling ashamed and embarrassed. By separating the deed from the doer, we are telling young people that we respect them, but that we don't like a particular behavior they have been displaying. When they say what they can do to make it better, they can then move on with their day without the unresolved feeling of "I'm a bad person."

In some cases, you can go a step further by creating an opportunity to follow up with the students. You might ask, "What is one thing each of you will do differently now to make sure this doesn't happen again?" and allow each student to respond. Then end by asking, "Which one of you can come by my classroom at the end of school today to let me know how it went?" or "Tomorrow, I want you both to let me know how the rest of the day was." Commitments give students something specific and constructive to try to achieve. The follow-up helps reintegrate the students, so they know they are no longer in trouble and that they can consider themselves in good standing as far as you are concerned.

Circles

As a symbol of community, circles are one of the most distinctive and flexible forms of restorative practices. Just sitting in a circle can create a feeling that a group of people is connected. When a teacher sits among students and an administrator sits among staff members, the quality of their relationship is enhanced.

Circles are a powerful process to proactively build bonds and community. They create space to increase social capital and develop norms. Circles also provide a forum to respond to conflict and wrongdoing. Circles can be used to conduct business, plan projects and learn new skills and procedures, as well as to deal with more serious problems that may occur.

An elementary school principal in Newark, New Jersey holds every staff meeting in a circle. He begins the circle with a fun and brief check-in. This is followed by a three-minute “shout out” where staff can celebrate or thank colleagues for something that occurred since their last meeting. Then they conduct their business, and each meeting ends with a one-word check-out to describe how people are feeling. These rituals have become very important to the staff, and they take turns planning the check-in questions.

A fifth-grade class began holding circle meetings every morning. At first the students were resistant, but soon they became accustomed to the circles and to talking with their peers each day. As the school year came to an end, a visitor happened to be in the class during a morning meeting and was invited to sit within the circle. The visitor asked the children if anything had changed since they had started using circles every day. The teacher felt a little uncomfortable, unsure if the students were aware of the improvements. Much to the teacher’s surprise, the students, each in turn, spoke eloquently about how they had become more respectful of each other because they had learned more about each other; they also shared that they now recognized their common membership in the classroom community.

Two significant developments were made apparent by the visitor’s question. While the teacher may have been aware of improvements in the classroom, she now realized that her fifth-grade

students understood the benefits of the circle meetings as well. Secondly, the students demonstrated that they felt comfortable making observations about themselves, even in front of a guest.

The most common way to do a circle meeting is to arrange chairs in a circle, ask a question and have everyone respond in turn, going around the circle. This “go-around” technique is the simplest and easiest to manage. With students especially, it helps to use a “talking piece,” a symbolic object that can be passed around from participant to participant, designating the only person who has the right to speak at that time. Although you don’t have to use a talking piece, it is important that no one interrupt the speaker. Students must patiently wait until their turn to speak. This circle go-around method creates remarkable decorum.

Only the teacher may interact with the speaker or ask a clarifying question in the circle go-around, but even this should be done with discrimination. Everyone needs to feel that they have the opportunity to say what they need to say. One of the most important benefits of this go-around strategy is that it affords quieter students opportunities to be heard without having to compete with more assertive students. Interestingly, these quiet students often make the most valuable contributions to the discussion.

Proactive Circles

Proactive circles are those that are designed to purposely and explicitly build connections and community. Proactive circles bring staff together at the beginning of the school year to build team spirit and set intentions. They provide opportunities throughout the year to build and sustain trust and comradery. For students, proactive circles may establish rituals they come to depend upon to assure a sense of safety and belonging. Proactive circles should make up at least 80% of the circles implemented in a community.

“Check-in.” At the beginning of class, you may do a go-around in which each student responds to a question or statement like:

- › How are you feeling today?

- › What is one of your academic goals for the day?
- › Make a commitment about your behavior in school today.
- › Review something you accomplished last week.

Praise students for their participation, even if they struggle to come up with something or seem reluctant to speak. Assume that students' apparent resistance, whether they act silly, interrupt other students while they are talking or refuse to talk at all, is motivated by anxiety and not disrespect for you. Their discomfort will dissipate quickly if you are confident and positive about the activity and address their behavior in a firm but caring way. For example, you might say, "Sam, you seem to think this is funny, but I would really appreciate it if you would take this circle seriously."

Also, it is helpful if the teacher and other adults who are in the circle participate and model the kinds of responses and behavior they would like to see from the students. For example, you may choose to be the first to answer the question. This will help put students at ease, give them a chance to know you better and set the tone for the go-around.

"Check-out." At the end of a day or a class, do a go-around in which each student responds to a question or statement like:

- › How was your day today?
- › Say one thing you liked about this class today.
- › What is one thing you learned today?
- › What are you looking forward to at school tomorrow?

Classroom norms. Classroom norms deal with the expectations and procedures for a particular class. Engaging students in a discussion about how students should act and how they can all work to enforce those expectations changes the nature of classroom management. It is advantageous to carry out this sort of discussion in a circle. Instead of the traditional arrangement of a teacher unilaterally making and enforcing behavior expectations, classroom

management becomes a collaborative process with shared responsibility and ownership. Here are some questions you might ask to begin a discussion about norms:

- › What helps you to learn while you are in class?
- › What stops you from learning?
- › In order for us to have a successful year together, what are some things we can agree on related to how we will all behave and treat each other?
- › How should we respond if someone fails to keep these agreements?

The more engaging you make this process, the more ownership students will take. Starting with, “Here are the rules of my classroom. How are you going to follow them?” will not have significant impact. Asking the students to suggest the rules and expectations is preferable. You might have them write up the norms on a large piece of paper and post them in the class for later reference. Interestingly, you will find that students identify and share most of the expectations that you have. When students suggest these norms themselves, they will be more likely to take responsibility for them. In our CSF Buxmont programs, populated by some of the most challenging youth in our region, we have found that engaging students in this process dramatically improves compliance with behavior norms.

Classroom content. An economics and entrepreneurship teacher in a high school was concerned that the students in one of his classes were not staying on task and that several students were repeatedly distracting the others. The teacher decided to run a circle for the whole class to focus on the academic content, but not on the challenging behavior. As they went around the circle, students were asked to “talk about your own strengths and weaknesses in terms of owning and operating a small business.” The teacher and his assistant went first to model what they expected. All of the students, including those who had been causing most of the problems, participated appropriately. The teacher later observed, “It was amazing that by using this

process, integrating curriculum content with restorative practices, the class went so well.” He added, “Since that time, I have integrated curriculum to reinforce to all students that their ideas and feelings do matter and have an effect on the class in general.”

The teacher found that circles were a useful tool. In order to make children feel comfortable with circles, you must use them in a variety of ways. In doing so, you will find that the use of circles can directly serve the academic purposes of your class by engaging students more actively in their own learning.

A sophomore science teacher in Los Angeles decided to begin each new unit with a circle. She develops check-in questions that relate to the curriculum content. She assesses prior knowledge and asks students for input about things they’d like to get out of the unit. To complete the cycle, she closes each unit with a circle to assess students’ “take aways.” These circles become predictable rituals, and students become co-leaders of the circles as the year unfolds.

Academic goals. The circle can also serve as a tool for setting academic goals. Students can use circles to establish plans for the upcoming class period, the rest of the week or the next unit of study. This type of circle transforms your students’ educational experience from that of passive recipient to active participant and planner. In addition to learning the course content, circles weave the critical skills of goal setting and monitoring into the daily classroom experience. Examples of questions you might use include:

- › What is your goal for class this week?
- › What is something you need in order to get your work done today?
- › What steps will you complete this week toward carrying out your project?

Besides goal setting, circles can be a useful tool for monitoring progress. By creating a feedback loop, students can comment on their own accomplishments. Instead of being accountable only to

the teacher, students will want to show their peers that they are being successful in school. Students can also give constructive feedback to one another:

- › What accomplishments have you made in this class in the past month?
- › Name someone in this class who worked hard this week.
- › What is the most useful thing you've learned this year?
- › Name someone who helped you.
- › What is something you know how to do that you didn't know how to do last year?
- › Say something positive about a member of the class.

Circles can merge the goals of community building and academic achievement so that students are strengthening relationships while addressing content areas.

An art teacher in a Baltimore middle school used the restorative questions to discuss her students' art projects. First, they talked about their creative process. Then, they discussed their feelings about the process and outcomes. Finally, they determined what they want to continue or change for the future.

Addressing behaviors proactively. Another very useful application of proactive circles is in preparation for taking students on a field trip. Hold a circle and ask the students to answer some questions about the upcoming trip such as:

- › How might you be tempted to act out on this trip?
- › What kind of impression do you want to make on people where we're going?
- › What do you think is the appropriate way to act in an art museum?
- › List some "dos and don'ts" for this trip.
- › How will you deal with any disagreements or problems you face with other students if something does happen?

You can use these kinds of proactive questions in a circle format

any time you are attempting a new type of activity or are going to do something with students where you know there is a potential for inappropriate behavior, such as watching a feature-length movie or playing a game in class. At our CSF Buxmont programs, where we bring together some of the most impulsive young people in our region, we have found that getting them to anticipate potential problems is a remarkably effective way to reduce the likelihood that those problems will ever occur. Raising consciousness reduces impulsivity.

Responsive Circles

Responsive circles are designed to address conflict and harm. Utilize them when you need to address incidents that have occurred or concerns that have developed within your community. Responsive circles bring together all the relevant members of a group to collectively address issues that have an impact on their safety, learning or productivity.

Behavior problems. At first, when they're new to you and your students, circles may feel awkward. Students may seem shy and resistant. But once circles have been established as a normal part of the classroom routine, at the beginning of each class, at the beginning and ending of the week, or perhaps every Wednesday, students will become very comfortable with the process. Teachers find that once they've established a routine of conducting circles, students will express concern if a circle doesn't happen at the appointed time.

As comfort, trust and expectations increase, circles present themselves as an excellent tool for responding to significant behavior problems that arise in the classroom. When only one or two students misbehave, it may be more appropriate to deal with the situation individually or in a small impromptu conversation as described previously. However, when misbehavior either involves or affects a larger group of students, or when the teacher wants to address a pattern of behavior rather than a specific instance, circles make it possible to respond to the problem, air feelings, repair the harm, address issues

and plan changes for the future.

There are many circumstances in which a teacher can't even pinpoint exactly why they have a bad feeling. Our inclination might be to ignore those subtle twinges of discomfort or to hope the problem will eventually fade away. In contrast, in our CSF Buxmont schools and group homes, we always tell our staff, "If it doesn't feel right, it's not right." It never hurts to bring up an issue in a restorative way. In almost every instance that a teacher feels something isn't quite right, students are feeling just as uneasy. Additionally, engaging young people in talking with their peers about behavior is a wonderful educational opportunity.

A ninth-grade teacher ran a circle to address an underlying feeling of friction that she was sensing among the students in her classroom. She decided to use a circle after she heard a girl express that other students were getting in the way of her learning. Based on the comments from the other students in the circle, however, the girl came to the realization that she was actually causing most of the problem herself. "That was a really hard day and students were in tears," said the teacher. "But after the circle the entire class got along fine." The teacher said that she often uses circles for dealing with behavior problems: "I can just say: 'This is how I'm feeling. How are you feeling? And what are we going to do to work together?'"

During these circles for addressing behavior problems, the restorative questions listed earlier can be used, but a variety of other questions may be helpful.

- › What was your part in the problem?
- › What can we do to make sure this doesn't happen again?
- › How do you feel when you get teased? [or when students make jokes while the teacher is talking, or whatever the inappropriate behavior may be]

When the circle does involve one or two identified "offenders," be sure to praise them while in the circle for their courage in dealing with the incident in such a public way. Always look for ways to

reintegrate them and allow them to reclaim their good names in the class.

A teacher had a stress ball (a ball that you can squeeze in your hand to relieve stress) shaped like an apple that she kept on her desk. She allowed students to use it, but one day the teacher noticed that the stem was missing from the apple. She was angry. She circled up her students and told them that she wanted to know who did it and that she wanted the stress ball to be replaced. In going around the circle, students identified one boy who then admitted what he had done: “I liked the ball. I was playing with it and the stem broke. I felt really bad, but I didn’t know what to do, so I just put it back on the desk without saying anything.” He was very sincere, acknowledging that he had handled the situation badly and offering to buy another one for the teacher. But as a result of his sincere apology, the teacher was feeling better and said: “No, I don’t need you to buy another one. That’s what I thought I wanted at first. But now I can see that all I wanted was for the problem to be acknowledged. Thanks for being honest.”

Circles can be used to address behavior problems when you don’t know who did something, like the example above, even when it is unlikely that anyone will accept responsibility. For example, if there are occasional incidents of petty theft, it is unlikely that a circle will identify the culprits. But you might initiate a circle go-around to help address the issue by asking each student to answer the questions, “Have you ever had something stolen from you?” and “What was it and how did it make you feel when that happened?” Or you can identify the problem by saying: “Things are getting stolen around our classroom. It would be great to know who is doing it, but let’s just talk about theft and how you felt in the past when something was stolen from you.”

The circle brings to consciousness the whole issue of stealing in a general way. Those who are taking things will hear from others how that makes other people feel and cause them to reflect on their own behavior. In fact, they will also have to talk about how they felt when something was taken from them. It is possible that the individuals who

are responsible for the thefts will speak up and admit their wrongdoing. In our CSF Buxmont programs, that happens occasionally. More often we have found that, even if the guilty parties don't admit their wrongdoing, the stealing stops.

In one of our CSF Buxmont schools someone stole money from a teacher's purse. In the circle the teacher told all the students that she didn't have a lot of money and that she was planning on using it to pay for cable television. She talked about how excited her own children were about this, but that now she would have to explain to them that she couldn't pay for it because the money was stolen. The students in the circle emotionally expressed their sympathy for the teacher and her children, and even though the culprit was never found, the teacher reported that she felt better just hearing what the students had to say. When you have had something stolen, your whole perspective can change and you may feel mistrustful of everyone. But in this case, the circle provided an opportunity for students to show their support to the teacher and help make her more comfortable in the school community.

In a similar situation at CSF Buxmont, students decided to each contribute a dollar or two to pay back a sum of money that was stolen. In yet another instance of theft, the students volunteered to hold a bake sale to raise the money to pay someone back. Although we always want to know "whodunit," we will rarely achieve that goal. But the use of circles can help the classroom or school community achieve other important goals that we usually overlook, like acknowledging the feelings of victims and offering them communal support. Using circle go-arounds, we can highlight the consequences of stealing, acknowledge the victim's feelings and restore a sense of well-being to the community.

Issues such as teasing, bullying or cheating can also be addressed indirectly, without confronting the offender. You might start a go-around in a circle by saying, "Name a time you got bullied and talk about what that was like." Alternatively, you could say, "Name a time you bullied someone and describe what that was like." So without

pointing fingers, especially when the problem is general, you don't have "proof" or the victim is too embarrassed to step forward, you can still confront the issue, explore the feelings and highlight the impact on others.

Some Tips for Running Circles

As teachers, you want circles to be a tool for building relationships and solving problems; but you are not counselors or social workers and you don't want circles to take over all the time in your class. Many of the simple go-around exercises and check-ins or check-outs can be done in a few minutes. Some tips to help your circles go smoothly are:

- › Set clear topics and goals for the outcome of the circle.
- › Set a positive tone. If you are confident and upbeat, the students will follow your lead.
- › Keep the focus. In a kind and supportive way, make sure the conversation sticks to the goal you have set.
- › Make students your allies. For example, you can tell several students before an upcoming circle, "I'm counting on you to speak up today," and ask them to speak first.
- › Always sit in the circle with students and participate fully.

The more circles you run, the easier they'll get. While we have provided many examples here, ultimately, you're going to have to be responsive to situations as they arise. This book is just a guide. You can always make up new go-around questions. You can run a circle where you say, "Talk about a pet you have, you had or you want" or "What do you hope to do this weekend?" The more students get to know each other and get to know you, the stronger the bonds that connect you will be. From a classroom management perspective, when people feel connected to one another through mutual understanding and empathy, they are less likely to misbehave or treat each other disrespectfully.

Formal Conferences

There are basically two types of formal conferences, although there are many variations and names given to them. The first is “restorative conferencing” and the second is “family group decision making” (FGDM) or “family group conferencing” (FGC).

Restorative conferences. Restorative conferences are formal responses to wrongdoing where all those involved and affected by an incident come together with a trained facilitator to explore what happened, who was affected and what needs to be done to make things right. The participants include those who did the wrong and those who were affected by the wrong, often together with the family or friends of both parties. A fight, incident of drug possession or other serious infraction in school (which may even involve a police response) might be appropriate for such a process. The conference takes a fair amount of time to organize and carry out and is facilitated by someone who has not been directly involved. A formal conference is not a routine classroom process run by the teacher, like circles, but is typically organized by someone else, often under the jurisdiction of the school administration.

The restorative conference model taught by the IIRP is called a “Real Justice” conference. It involves a script that the facilitator follows to ask a series of open-ended questions of each and every participant in the conference. The responses, of course, are not scripted. The original purpose of the script, when developed by former Australian police officer Terry O’Connell, was to limit the facilitator’s role in the conference. The facilitator is supposed to avoid interfering in the discussion and the decisions made by the participants in the conference. So O’Connell devised what he called “the script” and instructed the facilitator to confine their involvement to the written text that opens and closes the conference, the questions that are prescribed for offenders, victims and their supporters, and occasional but very limited interventions to keep the conference on track.

The following is the story of a restorative conference that was used to resolve a significant harassment problem on a school bus. Students from an alternative school for troubled youth and students from a private school traveled together on the school bus every morning and afternoon. A boy and a girl from the alternative school regularly teased and taunted two brothers from the other school, making cruel jokes about the fact that they were Jewish. The mother of the boys who were being abused called the principal of the alternative school and told her what was happening. The principal was extremely embarrassed and apologetic. As a possible remedy for the situation, she asked the mother if she and her children would be willing to participate in a restorative conference. The mother agreed and the conference was arranged.

When the conference convened, 18 people were present. The group included the students directly involved in the incident, other students from the bus and from each school who were there to support them, parents, a couple of teachers and the principal who had suggested the conference.

The conference facilitator, in this case a teacher from another school, welcomed the participants and explained that the purpose of the conference was to explore what had happened, how people were affected and what could be done to repair the harm.

First, the facilitator asked the offenders to talk about what happened. At this point their parents inappropriately interfered in the process, wanting to defend their children from being characterized as bad or hurtful. Their children's school principal, who was familiar with the conference process, assured the parents that everyone would get a turn to express their feelings and that all of the participants wanted to resolve this issue with a positive outcome. The parents quieted down and let the facilitator proceed.

The offenders, prompted with the questions from the facilitator, took responsibility for their behavior. They talked about thoughts and feelings they had since the incident. They realized that they were wrong in what they did and wanted to apologize.

They talked about how they thought the two brothers had been affected by what they had done.

The event became very emotional. The brothers talked about how they were afraid on the bus and that they were ashamed and embarrassed to be treated this way. Eventually everyone got a chance to speak. Interestingly, the friends of both the offenders and their victims were upset by the harassment. One African-American girl from the alternative school, who was a friend of the offenders, expressed her dismay at what they had done. She said she understood how badly the Jewish boys felt because she knew how she felt when others made derogatory racial comments to her.

During the last part of the conference, everyone was asked what outcome they'd like from the conference and how amends could be made, and formal agreements were drawn up. What the brothers and their mother wanted most was assurance that this would not happen again.

After formal conferences, refreshments are served. People symbolically “break bread” together and enjoy the informal atmosphere that allows them to reintegrate with one another after the formality of the conference. In this case, the parents of all the children talked. The Jewish mother invited the students who had harassed her sons and their parents to her daughter's bat mitzvah. The principal noted that “it was a remarkable event.”

Conferences like this one are the most formal choice on the Restorative Practices Continuum. As already mentioned, such events do not typically occur during a normal class period, though a teacher may be asked to attend such a meeting as a participant, and interested teachers may be trained to facilitate restorative conferences. Understanding restorative conferences fosters insight into all other restorative practices. Educators find the Real Justice conferencing training useful because it includes realistic role-plays that allow everyone to experience the different perspectives — victim, offender, parent, facilitator — thereby promoting empathy and illustrating the potential of restorative practices.

By giving everyone a chance to hear each other's story and speak, conferences often reveal points of view and emotions that wouldn't be known otherwise. During a school conference about a fight between a white and a black football player, a school counselor shared how one of the boys had come to her before the fight and told her about the racial tension that existed between the two teammates. She felt regretful that she hadn't done more to prevent the fight. The coach also expressed his sorrow that he had been unaware of the racially charged tension. Before these views were shared, the boys and their parents had held a defensive posture. When everyone realized the counselor and coach cared so much about both boys, the tensions softened and the group was able to bring the incident to a satisfactory resolution. The boys acknowledged the harm they caused, and they apologized to one another and others impacted. Later, they spoke directly to the whole team about what happened and what they learned from the conference. The team ended their season successfully, in terms of wins as well as comradery.